

Living Wisely in a Fallen World



Ecclesiastes 8:1-17

Bro. Ricky Cunningham

When I was a kid, many, many times I would be in a group of other kids about my age and somebody would lead us in singing a song, and I believe if my memory is correct we even sung this song at church. The words went like this, "If you are happy and you know it clap your hands, if you are happy and you know it clap your hands..." and then our version said, "...if you are happy and you know it then your face will surely show it, if you are happy and you know it clap your hands." We had a second verse where instead of clapping our hands, we would stomp our feet. Then we had a third verse, and this is the reason I think we sung this at Ledbetter in Sunday school, we would say, "If you are happy and you know it say amen..." And then, we had a fourth verse to where we would do all three, "If you are happy and you know it clap your hands, stomp your feet, say amen. If you are happy and you know it then your face will surely show it, if you are happy and you know it clap your hands, stomp your feet, say amen." I can tell some of you sang that song as a child as well. Now, I know this is going to totally blow your mind and you did not know I have this ability, but I am going to take that song and tweak it just a little bit —

"If you are wise, then your face will surely show it, and others will know it. If you are wise, you will be obedient, aware, and joyful." I have put Ecclesiastes chapter 8 to song.

We are going to try to speak from all 17 verses, but let's read verse 1 of Ecclesiastes chapter 8 as it sets the tone, transitioning from the 7th chapter to the thought of the 8th chapter.

Scripture

"Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing? A man's wisdom makes his face shine, and the hardness of his face is changed."

Let's hear that one more time and really open your mind and your heart to what Solomon is saying here. He's asking a question — "Who is like the wise? And who knows the interpretation of a thing?" This next part clarifies the first part, "A man's wisdom makes his face shine, makes the hardness of his face is changed."

Some scholars believe that verse 1 of chapter 8 should finish chapter 7. Others believe it begins chapter 8. Some like me don't know if it ends or starts but knows and believes it's a transition between what Solomon's been saying and what he's fixing to say next. If you remember when chapter 7 ends, he searched the land for wise men and wise ladies, and when he does his count, there's only one wise man for every thousand men he's met. Ladies didn't fare as well...not a one. One in a thousand humans, according to Solomon, he would consider wise. Now to a Jew, wisdom was not philosophical, it was not academic; it was theological, it was practical. Wisdom was the ability to take what you know and apply it correctly in a situation. So he asked the question to his audience: Who is like the wise? Can I just ask you are you like the wise? Are you the one in a thousand or are you the nine hundred and ninety-nine?

To understand wisdom from a Jewish perspective, Solomon asked the second question: Who knows the interpretation of things? See, this is what being wise was, it was knowing how to apply what was going on and react to it in a correct way. It's very practical. And then, he says your face will

show if you are wise or not. Wow! Have any of you ever heard anybody else measure wisdom by a guy's or a girl's face? No. We look at people and we see them do something or attain something, and we say, "Wow, they are wise!" That's not how Solomon measured wisdom. He says if you are wise, your face will show it. There will be a radiance that comes from you. There will be a change in your countenance, a change in your face from harsh and hard. Do you remember Moses, the law receiver, the law giver? He went into the presence of God, came out, and his face, his countenance, revealed he had been in the presence of God, to the point that he was asked to put a veil over it and turn the other way, he was so radiant.

Then we have Daniel. Can you imagine being Daniel? I mean we can't, we are Americans. Christians in America don't have a clue what persecution is. We don't have a clue what oppression is. Can you imagine being Daniel and a foreign enemy comes into your land, invades, takes you and other youth to another land, and then you are chosen to serve the king who ordered the invasion and the slaughter of many of your people, and you are going to serve him? You are not a law giver, you are not a law receiver, but you are a law follower. In that moment when he was put in the educational system, following God's law he says I can't eat that. Now, I'm reading between the lines but I think he said it in such a way that the man said... *Well, what are we going to do if you don't eat this?* To which Daniel replied... *Why don't you let me eat what I know is best, and why don't you let the rest eat what the king wants to eat, and then let's just set aside ten days and see if you can tell?* Do you remember what the book of Daniel says happened after ten days? The appearance of Daniel and his friends — you could just look at them and tell a difference!

Please hear this. What I think we are going to learn in the 8th chapter of Ecclesiastes is living wisely may not change our circumstances but it will change our countenance. We focus on changing circumstances because most of us want to be happy, but God's into changing countenance, and that's what wise living does. Remember this...we are going to learn in this book that you can be the wisest man in your neighborhood and it may not change your circumstances a bit, but it will change your countenance. And

so in your circumstances, no matter what they are good or bad, you can have a radiance that reveals why what's happening to you on the outside may not be good but what is happening to you on the inside is glorious.

Here's what I believe, and my ESV version does a pretty good job of letting me see this, but I think when we look at chapter 8, verses 2–9 form a unit that tells us how to live wisely, then verses 10–13 form a unit, and then 14 and 15 form a unit, and finally, verses 16 and 17 kind of conclude what Solomon wants us to hear about wisdom. So I am not calling verse 1 an introduction, it's a transition. It transitions us from what he's been saying about his search of wisdom and wise people, to now saying, are you one of the wise? As I share this message from God from the book of Ecclesiastes, I just want you to ask this question, am I wise? Do I have a radiance about me? Have people seen a change in my countenance because of my relationship with my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Am I living wisely in a fallen world?

Now, here's going to be the marks of living wisely for Solomon:

- 1. You are going to be obedient.**
- 2. You are going to be aware.**
- 3. You are going to be joyful.**

Let's start with verses 2–9. Now, you are not going to like this because we have have just come out of an almost three year pandemic and there are many people sitting in this church who feel like we are living under a government that reached way too far into our personal lives — listen to what Solomon says, “I say: [if you are like a wise person] Keep the king's command...” Whoa! He is saying be obedient to your government. Be obedient to the authority placed over you. Wow! I didn't see that one coming, did you? That from Solomon's perspective, a mark of wisdom would be how we react to authority? And the authority that he starts with is not church authority, not parental authority, but government authority. Now he tells us why — because of God's oath to him (the king). As much as you and I struggle living in a democracy, can you imagine what it would have been like to be in a monarchy? Can you imagine what it would been like to be the Apostle Paul and the early church living under Roman

oppression? Now, some of you going to say this is Old Testament, but you know what Paul said in the New Testament, right? Romans 13 says to submit yourselves to governing authorities because government is God's deacon. If you disrespect government, you are disrespecting one of God's deacons...whoa! That's the Apostle Paul, not me. But long before that in his search for wisdom, Solomon knew we lived in a fallen world and one of the marks of wisdom was to watch your attitude about your government because God made an oath to government, God made an oath to the king.

So here is what Solomon tells us, if we are wise, "Be not hasty to go from his presence." Now, in that day very few people actually got to be in the literal presence of the king. So, I feel like what this is talking about was when the king issued a ruling you had better not quickly disagree with it and do your own thing instead of what he said. You had better wisely consider what he said. Why? "...for he [the king] does what he pleases." Now, you and I are going to struggle because we have been raised in a form of government that prizes individual authority and individual freedom. We are a government of the people, for the people, and by the people. And wow, during COVID personal freedom came out everywhere! But here's what Solomon taught...that you, the individual, aren't sovereign but the government is.

God knows fallen humanity can't be left on their own. The book of Judges is a picture of people doing what was right in their own eyes and it was catastrophic to the nation. Now guys, this is just what the Word of God says, "Do not take your stand in an evil cause, for he does whatever he pleases." So don't get involved in those movements that cause people to revolt against God's governing authority, "For the word of the king is supreme, and who may say to him, 'What are you doing?'" His rule is sovereign, His will is sovereign, and his word is supreme, so you really can't say what are you doing? But I do say what are you doing — do any of you say what are you doing? Praise the Lord, we are under democracy not a monarchy, because we have our legislative branches, we have our executive branch, and we have our judicial branch, and ultimately if we don't agree, we just appeal to ourselves. No! Your word is not supreme, so be careful when you question. It doesn't say you shouldn't question, but be

careful when you question. Now, I'm going to throw this in here. We have several examples throughout Scripture where godly people did not do what the king said to do or the government said to do. Why? Because it was in contradiction to what God said. The book of Acts is clear — as Christians, we are going to obey God not man. Other than that, Jesus told us render to Caesar what is Caesar's. Jesus knew and Paul knew that God gave an oath to government, and government is put in place for our best interest because we live in a fallen world not a redeemed world yet.

Verse 5 says, "Whoever keeps a command will know no evil thing, and the wise heart will know the proper time in the just way." Now, please hear this. As long as you follow what the law of the land is, you are not going to get in trouble, but when you start doing your own thing, it's not going to be good. Now, that last phrase, in my opinion, is teaching when you get ready to disagree with those who God has placed over you, the wise heart will know the proper time and the proper way. You won't react in the flesh you will react under the control of the Spirit, and you will wait until the right time and you will do it the right way. Two wrongs don't make a right. Even when you feel those who have been placed over you make a wrong decision and do wrong, your response to their wrong can't be wrong and it won't be wrong if you are wise. But if you are unwise, there be a consequence.

Now, in these next verses, Solomon is going to explain what he just said. Let's look at verses 6–7, "For there is a time and a way for everything, although man's trouble lies heavy on him. For he does not know what is to be, for who can tell him how it will be?" This goes against everything we believe as an American individualist. I know what's best for me. What the writer is saying is in that moment when what's happening to you is not good and you are broken, you are hurt, you are burdened, and you think you know, you may not know what you think you know. And then he's telling us, in God's economy there's a time for everything. Does this make sense? I am just saying what the Word says.

Now, he's going to drive the point home to show that you and I are not in control in verse 8, "No man has power to retain the spirit, or power over the day of death." When you are lying on your deathbed and your spirit is

getting ready to leave you, there's not a one of us in here that can keep the spirit from leaving. You can't set the day of your death; it's out of your hands. In a fallen world, most things are out of our hands. In a fallen world, God has placed us under authority, not just His authority, but His deacon's authority, government authority. Verse 8 continues, "There is no discharge from war, nor will wickedness deliver those who are given to it." Now this doesn't mean before a war, you can't run and hide, and avoid the draft, but during the war, you don't leave, you don't quit, you don't stop. If you have been in the military, you know this to be true. As a matter of fact, there's a terrible four letters that describes someone who deserts the war — AWOL, absent without leave. Do you see what he's teaching? You are in a fallen world and you don't have ultimate control, so don't ever think this next thought...don't think if you do something wicked, if you do something evil, if you do something sinful, if you do something self-centered, it's going to deliver you. He says no, that will not deliver you.

So, what do we who are wise do? I know you don't want to hear this but you obey...you obey God's deacon. The last part of that verse 9 says, "All this I observed while applying my heart to all that is done under the sun, when man had power over man to his hurt." I want you to see what Solomon recognized. Solomon recognized that government authorities don't always get it right, and there are times when they hurt others. But what is the attitude of the wise? It's that we remain in the Spirit, not in the flesh. We remain peaceful, we remain obedient, and if something has to be done, we do it at the right time, in the right way, not a flesh reaction that's self-centered, but a God reaction. Now, I just want to ask you a question. Are you one of the thousand, or are you one of the nine hundred and ninety-nine, according to Solomon's definition of wisdom? Christians must live wisely in a fallen world so that our countenance can radiate that it's not our wisdom but it's the wisdom of God — and those who know us will see a change of countenance and our faith will reveal it.

Now, the second section of Scripture, verses 10–13, "Then I saw the wicked buried. They used to go in and out of the holy place and were praised in the city where they had done such things. This also is vanity. Because the sentence against an evil deed is not executed speedily, the

heart of the children of man is fully set to do evil. Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well..." Whoa! It's like he switches subjects here, "...it will be well with those who fear God, because they fear before him. But it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear before God." Do any of you see an issue here? Do you remember how chapter 7 starts — it's better to go to a funeral than a birthday party? How many of you are searching obituaries to go to funerals now? Here's what Solomon said. They buried a wicked man and evidently he went to the funeral. This wicked man had done a lot of evil things, but do you know what happened at the funeral? They praised him! I have seen it happen; I have almost done this — I have been to some funerals where someone preached the guy's message and I sat there thinking...*I don't know this guy you are talking about. This guy was a scoundrel! This guy was a drunk!* You know the kind of guy I am talking about. By the time he had finished talking about what a great guy this guy was, you would have thought he was in Heaven! Solomon says how can a person live their whole life doing evil things and then die and his works be praised? I'm sorry, but we shouldn't have funerals for those kind of people if we are going to have to lie.

Then here's the principle — because the sentence against evil is not done expediently, the heart of mankind is fully set on sin or evil. Now, I am struggling here with Ecclesiastes because I'm not sure if what Solomon is saying that the government doesn't execute criminals quickly then that just lets people think they can get by with sin and they become more sinful, or if he is talking about God as the divine judge doesn't execute wrongdoers quickly and it lets mankind think they can sin and get by with it. Now, come on, let's be honest. Raised where we have been raised, don't we kind of feel the same way about our government? Aren't there some people who we do not want to have the right to be innocent until proven guilty? We don't want them to have a right to a jury trial, and after jury trial have the right to appeal and appeal and appeal? Some of them, we want their life to be taken from them. Some of us have said if we were more strict, if we had tougher laws and we enforce the laws that we do have, we would have less crime.

I'm not really sure in this passage if Solomon is attributing this toward the government or attributing it to God, because here's what we all know is true — God sometimes judges on a delayed basis. There are a whole lot of people, according to Romans chapter 1, that He lets be as sinful as they want to be under His impending judgment, awaiting future judgment; and therefore he manages to become more and more sinful. This is the kind of world we live in. We have been so sheltered as Christians in this area to live in a world that was influenced by Christianity, and now were seeing those walls crumble. Now we are seeing things that we never thought we would see. And Solomon says because we have got delayed judgment and because we are not executing quickly, man is just going to become more and more sinful, more self-centered.

Look at the next part of this — “Though a sinner does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that it will be well with...” Now, I'm sorry I don't want to change this, but I think Mrs. Coleman would agree with me...he should have finished his thought but he added another thought in the middle here that's confusing. He should have said, “Though a sinner

does evil a hundred times and prolongs his life, yet I know that” → “it will not be well with the wicked, neither will he prolong his days like a shadow, because he does not fear God.” And *then* he should say, “But it will be well with [the righteous, the wise] those who fear God.” That's not what he says. He's talking about a sinner. A sinner can send a hundred times and he can live a long life in sin! But when he starts talking about it going well, it looks like it's going well with him because he sinned a hundred times, his life is being prolonged. But he switches to the one who fears God, to the one who's aware of God's presence; he's the one that it's well with. The one who's doing the sinning, the one who's enjoying living in a fallen world, it's not well with him.

Did you get that? It's not well. Here's what I think he's saying — if we just knew what he knew as king. I am glad some of you don't know what I know, because in America we have so painted the American dream as being the answer that we all live for, if we just knew the people who have arrived and had it all then just saw what went on behind those walls and what's going on inside, you would know it's not well. I am going to get in

trouble for saying this but I'm going to say it anyway. How well is your life when you have everything you think you want and you are getting everything you are striving for, but at the end of your day, you have to knock the edge off? Are you kidding me? Solomon knew it wasn't going well. And it's not going well, except for one group people and that's the group of people that's aware of the presence of God, the group who lives in the fear of God — a fear that doesn't cause us to run from Him but a fear that produces such a respect in us and awe for him that we run to him and we want to live our life His way! He's talking about doing this in the fallen world. He's talking about doing this when everything going on around us. People are getting ahead by sinning and being self-centered, but because they are not aware of God in their life, Solomon says it's not well with them. The only ones it's well with are those who, in a fallen world, are aware of God and His presence with you, near you, in you. Your face will show it!

Last section, and this is unbelievable, verses 14 and 15, and we are going to read verse 14 first. "There is a vanity that takes place on earth, that there are righteous people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the wicked, and there are wicked people to whom it happens according to the deeds of the righteous. I said that this also is vanity." He starts by telling us he saw vanity, and then he tells us what he saw, and then he reminds us it's vanity. Here's the vanity of life — people don't get what they deserve. Wow...there are some wicked people who live sinfully their whole life and guess what? They get what good people deserve. Everything happens good to them. And then, there are some really good people and really bad things happen to them. Solomon said this is vanity. That's the world we live in, guys! It goes right opposite of what we say. We want people to get what they deserve, right? We want justice but we live in a land of injustice, so what do you do? How do you and I as Christians live in a world where great things and great outcomes happen to bad people? And then we are going to build monuments to them when they die! We are going to name things after them! We are going to fight for some of those things!

And then, there are really good people and some really bad things in life are happening to them. Well, here's what he says will happen if you are wise. Verse 15 says, "And I commend joy, for man has nothing better under the sun but to eat and drink and be joyful, for this will go with him in his toil through the days of his life that God has given him under the sun." I love this. I pray it rocks your world. If we are going to live wisely in a fallen world, we have to be obedient to authority, we have to be aware of God's presence, but thirdly, we have to be joyful. We have to quit seeking happiness because happiness is based on what's happening to you. It's external usually. Joy is not based on what's happening to you; it's based on what's already happened to you. You have been brought into right relationship with God through the finished work of His Son, Jesus Christ, and in the midst of living in a fallen world where you are striving to do good and to do right, some really bad outcomes are going to fall upon you, some really bad circumstances are going to happen to you, but in the midst of that, you are going to be joyous. This word, commend, means praise. What Solomon is saying is I praise joy — there's nothing better we can do under the sun than to eat, drink, and be joyful. Here's why, because when you are joyful, you take your joy to your work, and you recognize that all the days you have are a gift from Him! You don't do things to get joy, you don't go to work to get joy; you take joy to your work. And if you take joy to your work, you can recognize today is a gift from God. So do you know what I'm going to do? I am not going to focus on the fact that I'm living in a fallen world, I am not going to focus on all the bad that happens to good people and the good that happens to bad people, I am going to focus on being wise. My response to whatever is happening is going to be right. I am going to recognize God's presence and I am going to recognize today is a gift from Him. I'm not going to take it for granted! I want you remember the vanity he saw — we sometimes get what we don't deserve, and we don't deserve today and we don't deserve tomorrow. It's a gift from God and the wise will take that gift from God no matter what their circumstances are and allow their relationship with Jesus to brighten their countenance in the midst of that circumstance so that others will know we are living wisely.

Look at this last paragraph, verses 16–17, When I applied my heart to know wisdom, and to see the business that is done on earth, how neither day nor night do one's eyes see sleep [meaning, if you really contemplate what's going on in the world, it's day and night] then I saw all the work of God, that man cannot find out the work that is done under the sun.

However much man may toil in seeking, he will not find it out. Even though a wise man claims to know, he cannot find it out.” If you are really wise, you realize you don't know. You don't really know what God's doing. You don't really know why what happened, happened. But Solomon believed he was under sovereign control of God, which means He either allowed it or he caused it.

Now, I want to the New Testament and I will end with this thought. Live wisely in a fallen world by recognizing that while you don't know what God is doing, you do know what He's doing if you are a believer. While you may not understand all the circumstances that are happening — why the government's doing what it's doing, why sinful people are doing what they're doing — but you know God is doing...He is conforming you into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ. He is not trying to get the world to be like you. I don't want to burst your bubble, but He's not trying to make the church like you either; He is trying to make all of us believers like His Son, Jesus, and that's what I do know. That's what sustains me when I don't know. What sustains me is what I do know — He's got a sovereign purpose for it. Therefore, I'm going to choose to be joyous. I am going to count it all joy when my faith gets tested. Amen? If I am an unbeliever, here's what I should know — a thousand years is as a day and a day is as a thousand years to God. He's long suffering and He's patient, because do you know what he desires? He desires all to be saved. Do you know why He's letting us live in a fallen world? Do you know why He's letting you and me be as sinful as we want to be if we are not believers? It is to recognize we are under His wrath, already separated from Him, and our only hope is Jesus Christ. If you are a sinner living in this fallen world, one day your life's going to be over and you are going to spend eternity separated from God forever and ever and ever. Please consider Christ. Believers — let's get our eyes off of fallen world. Let's get our eyes on the One who is presence is near us and let's be wise.